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Afghan National Army Assists in Plane Crash Rescue Mission

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KABUL, Afghanistan—The crash of a Kam Air Boeing 737-200 was the worst air disaster to occur in Afghanistan. The International Security Assistance Force made numerous unsuccessful rescue attempts by helicopter. But when technology fails it takes boots on the ground to get the job done. Because Afghanistan has about 18,600 pairs of boots on the ground with its ever growing Afghan National Army; Afghanistan was able to call on its Army and the ANA was there to accomplish the mission.

Following the crash of the Kam Air plane carrying 104 people, the Ministry of Defense ordered the Central Corps of the Afghan National Army to assemble a team and attempt a rescue of the people presumed to be alive from the terrible plane crash that occurred on Friday, February 4, 2005.

The crash site was at an altitude of 3,300 meters (11,000 feet) on the peak of the Chaperi Mountain 20 miles east of Kabul. Attempts by the ISAF to fly



Photo by U.S. Army National Guard Maj. Eric Bloom, Task Force Phoenix PAO

2nd Kandak (Battalion) 3rd Brigade Afghan National Army soldiers climb to KAM Air crash site. The ANA were called up to support the rescue attempt of Kam Air 737-200 which crashed on Feb. 4. The Soldiers were able to reach the summit but had to descend due to severe weather conditions. Several of the Soldiers had to be treated for frost bite and other cold related injuries.

to the scene were hampered due to weather.

The mission assigned to the ANA was to traverse the opposite side of Chaperi from where the crash site occurred to attempt to reach the summit and locate any survivors.

At Pol-e-Charkhi, where the ANA's

Central Corps Soldiers are based, Lt. Col. Kabuly Qadeer, Commander of 2nd Kandak (Battalion) 3rd Brigade quickly gathered his Kandak of soldiers, mounted their vehicles, and prepared to head to the Chenari Village at the base of the mountain. Along side the ANA were their U.S. Embedded Tactical Trainers. The team's commander, Lt. Col. Gordon Johnson Jr., South Carolina Army National Guard, said their mission is to support the ANA in any situation that develops.

The ANA rapidly responded to the order and headed for the base of the Chaperi Mountain. There, the 2nd Kandak and the U.S. advisors setup a command center to coordinate between ISAF and the Central Corps Headquarters at Pol-e-Charkhi.



Photo by U.S. Army National Guard Sgt. 1st Class Mack Davis

Afghan National Army BMP-1 crew members of 2nd Kandak (Battalion) 3rd Brigade, wait on word to depart the base camp and head for the Kam Air 737-200 plane crash site.

Lt. Col. Kabuly Qadeer, commander for 2nd Kandak (Battalion), 3rd Brigade, Afghan National Army, seated on the left in the command center at the base of the mountain where the crash occurred, and South Carolina Army National Guard member Lt. Col. Gordon Johnson, embedded training team commander, discuss plans to climb to the summit of the Kam Air plane crash.



Photo by U.S. Army National Guard Maj. Eric Bloom, Task Force Phoenix PAO

First, the ANA setup two check points leading into the area. The recovery team needed to limit the number of people around the crash site.

Next, Qadeer accompanied 40 of his ANA soldiers aboard a BMP-1 (Armored Personal Carrier) and an elder from the local village to use as a guide in a rescue attempt. Qadeer, who is a seasoned mountain fighter, was familiar with the terrain.

The team departed the base camp around 1 p.m. on Sunday. The ANA soldiers, without any type of special climbing gear, were able to reach half way up the 3300 meter mountain by dusk in the difficult weather. The Afghan Army soldiers had to halt operations due to another snow storm but were able to find one of many caves to hunker down in for the night.

Qadeer, returned with half of the soldiers on the BMP-1 back down the mountain to give a situation report to the command center, and to collect more supplies. The cave provided shelter for the soldiers who remained behind; however, according to the ANA soldiers, they had to burn two of their sleeping bags to generate some heat. The soldiers said once they got the cave warm, body heat kept them comfortable.

Once Qadeer returned off the mountain and arrived to the command center, he met with his staff and Johnson. In the command center Qadeer and Johnson discussed how the first attempt to ascend the mountain was

going. Qadeer was very optimistic saying, "The climb is going good, and we had to stop because of the snow. I will get my men some more equipment and supplies and head out again in the morning." Johnson, who had received an update from ISAF, explained to Qadeer that ISAF was planning to fly a Slovenian mountain rescue team onto the mountain.

The two of them along with other 2nd Kandak staff reviewed the plan for Monday. While conducting the briefing Johnson told them "The eyes of the world are watching the ANA on this mission. And the army is showing the Afghan people that they are able to serve them in many situations."

Packed and ready to go the team departed the base camp. At 7 a.m., the ANA soldiers were off again with fresh clothes, carrying extra food and water.

The ANA team left the base camp and was able to reach an area of the summit within five hours and rejoin the second half of its team who had continued its mission the same morning.

According to U.S. advisor Capt. Benjamin Dunn, South Carolina Army National Guard, "I am really impressed with these guys. The way they persevered up the mountain without special climbing gear is remarkable, and they are getting the job done."

The Soldiers began to continually probe the snow with climbing sticks in



Photo by U.S. Army National Guard Sgt. 1st Class Mack Davis

2nd Kandak (Battalion) 3rd Brigade Afghan National Army Soldiers stand in formation. The Soldiers had ascended the Chaperi Mountain and discovered there were no survivors of Kam Air flight that crashed on Friday. The team will now shift its operation to a victim recovery operation. The ANA will support the International Security Assistance Force in the recovery efforts when weather will permit helicopter flight to the area.

hopes of finding some remnants of the wreckage. Because the snow was over chest high and the ANA was not equipped with any type of global positioning devices, locating the main crash site was difficult for them.

ISAF was able to get an aircraft up that morning and with a team of Slovenian Mountain rescue members, located the site and determined that no one had survived the crash.

Due to severe weather the ISAF members had to leave the mountain in order to avoid being caught in the adverse conditions.

The team of Afghan soldiers were within 100 meters of the crash site when a severe storm warning was issued from the command center. The ANA team was going to spend Monday night on the mountain and await medical teams that hoped to arrive the following morning to recover the crash victims, according to Gen. Mohammed Zahir Azimi, Ministry of Defense spokesperson.

The ANA Soldiers not in contact with ISAF were directed to return to the base camp. Gen. Moween, Central Corps commander knew of the storm's approach and concerned with visibility and their safety, ordered the dismounted Soldiers to return to base camp.

As the ANA made their way down, the weather continued to deteriorate rapidly. There was concern the soldiers were not going to make it down ahead of the storm.

In many rescue attempts like this, rescue teams are often caught in storms while ascending or descending occasionally they need to be rescued themselves.

The ANA Soldiers were able to make it back ahead of the storm, bringing with them valuable information needed for the recovery of victims. According to Johnson, "the speed and audacity in which the ANA operated on this mission would be impressive to any nation's army."



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Afghan National Army Lt. Col. Kabuly Qadeer, commander for 2nd Kandak (Battalion) 3rd Brigade, communicates with an ANA team of Soldiers at the half way point of Chaperi Mountain. Qadeer who returned off the mountain the night before to give a situation report to the command center prepares to reunite with the team at the top.

The ISAF rescue team determined there were no survivors of the plane crash and that the operation would shift from a rescue to a recovery mission. The ANA completed the rescue mission given to them by their country.

ISAF began phase 2 of the operation, which was planning recovery. But, the snow had continued and fog covered the mountain side hampering flying operations. The ANA adjusted its operation and is standing by to assist in the recovery. The ANA will continue

to provide security to the area and conduct check point operations.

Qadeer told the soldiers of the 2nd Kandak, "The people of Afghanistan are proud of you! You were given a mission to deploy; setup check points, setup a command center, and climb to the crash site to support a rescue mission and you completed the mission. I thank you all."

Contributing to this story was U.S. Army National Guard Maj. Eric Bloom, Task Force Phoenix PAO.

